

Our Boys and Girls

HESTER'S FATHER.

By Willametta Preston.

"Remember, father, you are to present every one of those bills," Hester held up her finger warningly. "I cannot go to Cousin May's unless I have a new dress. I cannot have a new dress unless you can get the money. It is all yours. You have earned it twice over."

"I'll do my best." Doctor Brown's voice was not reassuring. "Times are hard and the people are poor."

"I might as well give it up, here and now!" exclaimed Hester petulantly. "I can't go in just my old clothes."

"Suppose we do the best with what we have until father comes home to-night," advised her mother. "You have the ribbons to run in your underwear. It is fortunate you had that case of ribbons come last Christmas. Your new white skirt needs some finishing stitches. You might make some dainty collars from that roll of pretties in my drawer."

Hester was soon at work doing these little, but important, things. Cousin May had sent her a ticket, and she must be ready to start in a week's time. It would be impossible to get the material and make the two dresses she considered necessary unless her father brought home the money that night. She simply must have a white wool for evenings and a cloth suit for the street.

She knew, as her father came slowly in from the barn, that he had not succeeded; but she half pulled him into the bright room.

"Just look in his eyes," laughed James. "He looks like I feel when I've forgotten something. You never could have forgotten those bills, could you?"

"No, my son." Doctor Brown dropped wearily into the "sleepy hollow" chair that Hester pushed up to the glowing fire. "I remembered every one of them; but I didn't get a dime."

"O father!" reproached Mrs. Brown.

"Wait until I tell you of my calls; then you may go wherever you like for the money due me. I could not ask for it or take it when offered."

"I know you did exactly right." Hester perched on the arm of his chair and laid her hand caressingly upon his fast-graying hair. Hard as it would be to give us the new dresses, she had absolute confidence in her father's judgment. "But it's yours by right, father. You earned every dollar of it twice over," she insisted.

"First came old Mrs. Rowe," her father began. "Her house is almost ready to tumble down; no wonder she is so troubled with rheumatism. She was almost out of wood, but she had saved five dollars for me. So I stopped at Jones' and ordered her a load of wood, and Jones is going to fix things for the winter. The Hawkinses were in great trouble. Ted was caught in an auto smash, and was in the hospital. They had sold one of their cows that morning to pay his bills. I could take the last one. Two families had gone away for a month. In another three little children were almost shoeless. In another I was just in time to help a new baby into the world. In another—"

"You needn't go on, father." Hester's kisses effectually stopped further explanations.

"I'd rather have you just as you are than the finest of new dresses."

"All the same, I cannot go with just my old brown merino and that thin white. Cousin May would be ashamed of me." Hester waited until her father had left the house next morning before making this statement.

"It will not be necessary for you to do either, my child. I have two dresses saved for you. They were too full of precious memories for me to cut them over for you as a child. Now you have grown up to them, and the latest fashion notes say they have come back, even to the way they are made. I wore them during those happy days when I first knew your father. Come into my room and see them."

Hester looked with surprise bordering on consternation at the two dresses. One was of fawn color, a large broken plaid, with faint pink and green lines; it was not so bad. The other was a large unbroken check of brown and blue that seemed to stare one in the face. She simply couldn't wear that. But her mother was speaking in a strangely moved voice.

"That fawn-colored is a raw silk. It will make you a dinner gown, with a few alterations. I have some white lace to fix your thin white. That will have to do for evenings. On no account allow Cousin May to persuade you to wear any of the girls' clothes. You owe that to your father. The blue-and-brown will make you a church suit. You will be far better dressed than you could have been in the new dresses we would have bought. Remember, these dresses have some of the happiest memories of my life wrapped in their folds."

"O mother!" Then Hester resolutely forced back the protest that was on her lips. She could and would wear these hideous gowns unflinchingly if it would please her mother. Her father could take a high place in the medical world if he chose. She knew that, for she often copied his articles for him—articles which came back to them in the leading medical journals of the day. She would be proud of her father, even though he would bury himself in this little country town.

"How about the dresses?" asked her father, as Hester told him in the morning that she was going.

"Why, didn't you know? Mother gave me two silk dresses of hers. I wonder if you remember them, a fawn-colored one and a blue-and-brown check?"

"That was the prettiest dress I ever saw in all my life." Her father's thoughts drifted back to those happy days.

Hester found Cousin May's home far grander than she had expected. She had only seen this stately cousin twice, when she had brought frail Donald to them for country air and her father's care, and again when she had to come to take him home entirely well. She had never seen the daughters. There were three of them, the middle one, Natalie, about her own age; Hilda, a year older; Erminie, a year younger. They were all dressed for dinner when they came into Hester's room. Natalie was in light blue, Hilda in rose color, Erminie in white.

When they left her to dress for dinner Hester had no choice but to put on her fawn-colored. She was conscious of Cousin May's critical glance, but immediately afterward was surprised at the girls' enthusiastic admiration.

"You have the very latest style—and you just from the country! How did you manage it? Why, our city stores have hardly shown them yet!" exclaimed Hilda.

Cousin May knew the secret of the dress, Hester was sure. She would not tell the girls how old the dress really was. It was a precious secret of her mother's that she would keep.

The days were full of delightful, unexpected pleasures. She went with her cousins to the large stores and marveled at the latest orders given. There were long mornings of sight-seeing. There were concerts, guests, long trips in the large touring car. Hester wore her old merino most of the time, her fawn-color for all special occasions. Although her mother had assured her of its return to style, Hester had not yet brought her courage to the point where she could wear the startling blue-and-brown plaid.

Then came a letter from her mother. "I hope you are enjoying the plaid silk as much as I did. Tell me when you wear it. Fill it with happy memories of your own."

"And I haven't played fair with mother, not wearing it once. I'll wear it the first chance I have that's fine enough," Hester promised her mother's picture.

The chance came the very next day: an invitation to an afternoon reception at Mrs. Schuyler's to meet a celebrated traveler just back from Egypt.

"Your fawn-colored is not grand enough for this," laughed Natalie. "If you haven't something stunning, do wear one of mine."

"I have one that is stunning enough, if that is all you want," smiled Hester. "Wait until you see me arrayed in all my glory." But she would not show it to Natalie. She could not run the risk of a possible laughing protest against it. She was determined to give that dress at least one happy memory to take home to her mother.

At the very last moment, wrapped in a long gray cape which she had permitted Cousin May to lend her for the machine, she ran down just as the others were seated.

"Have you on your very stunningest suit?" asked Erminie.

"Yes," whispered Hester.

It was a long, lovely drive up the Hudson, and a magnificent home into which they were ushered. In the dressing-room Hester must drop her cape and take off her long veil. Her jaunty little turban was of brown with bows of blue. It was a costume to arrest attention. She expected her cousins to be shocked. Would they refuse to let her go down in that dress?

Cousin May understood, and drew Hester close to her.

"You look exactly as your mother did the night she first met your father. And the silk has come back in style, after all these years. You have the very latest thing in a reception gown."

The girls were full of low exclamations.

"You have had this stunning suit all this time and never wore it? Well, we'll see that you do not hide it again."

"It's the very latest thing. They are just showing it in models."

"People will think it's an important thing," admired Erminie.

Thus reassured, Hester felt immediately relieved. She could go down with her cousins, meet the hostess and the distinguished guest, and enjoy it all. She would have a happy time to write home about.

As Hester was presented to the distinguished guest there was a start of recognition.

"Are you not—you must be, for you are the living image of one of my dearest friends. Are you not Hester Grint's daughter? You